

How and why the Dutch fished for cod 1818–1911

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The history of Dutch cod fishing evolved in reverse order to the evolution of today. Now, the old perspective is the perspective focusing on maximizing catch rates, whereas in the 1800s this was the new perspective. Today, the new perspective is focusing on (coherent) ecosystems and human systems, while in the 1800s this was rejected as old-fashioned by judicial reforms.

Dutch cod fishing in the 1800s was a line and hook fishery along the coast and at or around Doggerbank in the North Sea. Cod fishing took place in summer and in winter depending on the time of the herring fishery or the trade with Spain and Portugal. The fishing community set rules on fishing and curing the fish, and worked according to these rules for generations. At the beginning of the 1800s these rules became basis for a financial subsidy to the cod fishers granted by the king lasting to the 1850s. Due to unrest and political change elsewhere in Europe and financial problems domestically, the politicians in the Dutch parliament then restricted the king's role and influence in the monarchy and began liberalizing the laws including those on fishing. The freedom was not new to the ship owners and fishers; it was the authorities' disrespect to their rules that made the difference. No one cared if the fishers followed the rules or not, so many of the fishers started fishing as they pleased. The subsequent time is considered a time of progress and initiative because many fishers took advantage of new technology and started catching more fish and earning more money. It became a time when people outside the fishing community paid attention to the progress in fishing and invested in the new limited companies that came into existence. Only by the end of the 1800s did the authorities notice the ship owners and fishers who had not rejected their old means of fishing or their own rules on fishing. They had objected to the new technology because of its damaging effect on the seabed and the nursery area to the juveniles, but they were met with no sympathy until they started resigning from fishing because of decline in the cod stock. The authorities finally agreed to support scientific research on the state of the fish stock and the fishery. A case study and a selective analysis of the structure of fishing business, family business in particular explains the profound impact of the changes. Elinor Ostrom works with the consequences of change of rules in relation to common-pool resources like fishing. When the empirical data from Dutch cod fishing history is analysed using Ostrom's theory and game theory, they show a picture of the strategies the ship owners and fishers made before and after the reforms explaining how and why some maintained a sustainable fishery and others did not. Edith Penrose's theory on the growth of the firm emphasizes the accumulated knowledge and experience within a firm as a valuable asset for surviving obstacles and improving business. It confirms the picture on sustainable fishery and adds another perspective to reflect on concerning current cod fishing.